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ABSTRACT

Asian Americans are popularly stereotyped as possessing innate characteristics that enable them to achieve excellence in virtually all fields of endeavor. But the reality of contemporary Asian American experiences is more complex, less easily summed up, and not yet thoroughly documented or understood. Current evidence does suggest, however, that Asian Americans (who comprise 1.5 percent of the total United States population) perform more successfully in school than other groups. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Asian American students go on to better jobs and incomes. From preschool to graduate studies, the typical profile of Asian American abilities has been somewhat above average in math tasks, but lower than average in verbal tasks. Several theories have been advanced to explain why Asian Americans concentrate on mathematics and science, but it is clear that they will continue to face difficulties in career development unless they acquire the verbal fluency needed for advancement in any field. According to the 1980 census, the Asian American median family income was higher than that of White families, but the median salary of Asian academicians and of Asian scientists was still lower than that of their White counterparts. Without stronger verbal reasoning and communication skills, it is unlikely that Asian Americans will achieve more equitable salary structures, broadened professional networks, or more frequent invitations to play decisionmaking roles in the academic and professional worlds. (KH)

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The Silent Minority: Asian Americans In Education and Work

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Educational Testing Service

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The Silent Minority: Asian Americans in Education and Work

During the past few years, there have been, in the popular press, a number of what I generally think of as testimonials to the abilities, motivation and achievement of Asian Americans, particularly their excellence in education. Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, the Christian Science Monitor and the Washington Post, even the Wall Street Journal, have published feature stories or op ed essays on the superior academic performance of Asian American Students.

Without it being said in so many words, the general impression one comes away with is that there must be distinctive qualities of intelligence, character or even virtue that are shared by all Asian Americans, individuals as far apart from each other as a well off fourth or fifth generation suburban Japanese Californian and a recently landed Cambodian with neither English nor prior schooling, who has spent most of his or her life without family support in a Thai refugee camp.

Somehow, special Asian characteristics are assumed to help all Asian American youth--of every socioeconomic status, from diverse cultural backgrounds and with different lengths of time in this country--to transcend the ties of family, the boundaries of society and the burdens of history to achieve excellence in virtually all fields of endeavor. These nebulously defined Asian qualities have apparently helped Asian Americans to overcome past inequities, to optimize their returns on investment in education and to evolve into a "model" minority: "overrepresented" in trendy specialties such as mathematics, computer science and technology, with jobs that pay them more

than typical White families can earn. In sum, they are currently regarded by the media as embodiments of the American dream. These encomiums have the earmarks of a new American myth. The Asian Americans in these stories are stereotypes. Even upbeat stereotyping will not serve Asian Americans well. They homogenize their diversity, rob them of individual and community character, and set them apart from all other Americans, including other minorities. They invite White backlash.

The reality of contemporary Asian American experiences is more complex, less easily summed up, not yet really thoroughly documented or well understood. But it does deserve and is beginning to receive closer scrutiny, precisely because of what might be learned about excellence in American education.

Excellence is a word that has been used with a frequency approaching abandon. The Webster unabridged dictionary, second edition, defines excellence in a person as one who possesses any valuable, laudable, meritorious or virtuous qualities in an unusual or eminent degree. That is a broad enough definition to encompass even modest success, which is the level current evidence can support with respect to the Asian Americans experience in American education. The signs of success include slightly above average statistics in the numbers who attend mostly public but some private elementary and secondary schools, the numbers who have already elected the "new basics" recommended by a variety of panels and committees to achieve national educational excellence, proportions of students who elect academic curricula and stay in high school through graduation, typical grades in academic subjects, average or above average achievement test scores, persistence through college and beyond to the first professional degree and doctorates,

and the gaining of some types of peer and expert recognition. Fellow Symposium participants are talking about some of these data in detail, so I will only touch upon a few highlights.

The 1980 census counted Asian Americans and found they were about 1.5% of the total U. S. population. Every ethnic group under the umbrella name Asian Americans, including recently arrived Asian immigrants, participated in elementary and secondary schools at high rates. Except in the States of Nevada and Colorado, relatively few Asian Americans are enrolled in special programs for the handicapped, with the exception of average incidence in classes for the speech impaired and the trainable mentally handicapped. Asian Americans are not evenly distributed across all 50 states, but concentrate in a few areas. They are the majority in Hawaii, being 56% of the population. Asian/Pacific Americans are 71% of the enrolled elementary and secondary school pupils. Asian American pupils are just under 7% of the total enrollment in California, and 4% in Washington. None of the other 47 states had enrollments much above 2% and most under 1% of Asian Americans elementary and secondary school pupils. The growth in U. S. Asian population since the 1960s has been due to immigration, not natural increase. So that if the immigration laws were to be changed once again to limit Asian immigration, Asian Americans would remain a visible mini-minority in most parts of the country. However, their participation rate in higher education is significant.

The single quality that distinguishes Asian Americans from all other groups in U. S. education today is tenacity. Sam Peng and his NCES colleagues have reported that only about 3% of Asian Americans in the High School and Beyond sample dropped out of high school before their senior year. That is

about one fourth of the dropout rate among Whites. Very few of the High School and Beyond seniors made plans for work, but 8 out of 10 planned higher education and 6 out of 10 expected to attend a four year institution. That is more than one and one half times the proportion among their White classmates. Other data support these findings.

In 1980-81, Asian Americans garnered 2% of Bachelor's degrees, 2.1% of the Master's and 2.7% of doctorates. They also earned 2% of the first professional degrees conferred. At every age level from 16 to 34 years, higher proportions of Asian Americans are enrolled in school than all other U. S. population groups. For the foreseeable future, Asian American participation in higher education will continue to rise, because the numbers of college age Asian Americans and Asian immigrants are growing. Asians enter and stay in the educational pipeline in higher proportions and leave it at later ages than all other groups. Furthermore, it is the newcomers, not the third and fourth generation Asian Americans, who are investing the most heavily in higher education, taking into account opportunity costs.

Because of geographic concentration and the numbers that apply to selective four-year colleges, more Asian Americans participate in the ATP than the ACT assessment program. In 1982-83, about 1.3% of the high school ACT test takers called themselves Asian Americans. That same year, 4.2% of SAT college bound seniors were Asian Americans, about half of all Asian American 18 year olds. Taking into account the fact that some students registered for both assessment programs, it was about twice the White rate. Asian American participation in SAT had doubled in the eight years since 1975 and most of the increase represented newcomers. By 1983-84, Asian American SAT candidates had

risen to 4.5% of the total test taking population. More than 7% of the Advanced Placement tests were also taken by Asian Americans. SAT candidates who are Asian American report plans to continue through to the professional level at about twice the rate of their White peers.

Neither lack of proficiency in English nor low family income deter Asian Americans from making plans for college. More than 28% of last year's SAT candidates who were Asian reported that English was not their best language. Only 1.7% of Whites, 9.8% of Puerto Ricans and 8% of Mexican Americans did so. Twenty-two percent of the Asian American SAT candidates reported their family income to be in the two lowest income groups, about three times higher than White candidates. Asian American candidates are not nearly as select a group within their own population as all other groups of test candidates. The poorest students, and the most likely to be limited in English, are those from families of Southeast Asian refugees or other recent immigrants.

Not even lack of academic ability seems to discourage Asian Americans from making college plans. ACT published 1972 norms for disadvantaged students grouped by income and ethnicity. Asian American ACT participants from families with less than $6,000 a year earned ACT English test scores lower than those of Whites, Blacks and Hispanic Americans. Nor were their mathematics scores much better. Yet, these disadvantaged Asian Americans, who planned to live at home and enroll in local colleges, reported plans for education beyond the Bachelor's degree more frequently than all other disadvantaged groups.

This singleminded pursuit of higher education has its roots in American history. Earlier Asian immigrants, even those with experience in skilled

trades, could not ply their trade because of violent opposition from business and labor unions. Education seemed one of the few ways out of the ghettos. But opportunities for higher education did not really open up for most Chinese, Japanese and Filipino Americans until after the second World War, and equality of educational opportunity was not a reality until the enactment of the Civil Rights Law in the '60s. Even now, advanced academic degrees are earned by nonresident Asians three times more often than Asian Americans. It took two to three generations in the U. S. in the days before expanding educational opportunities after World War II and the Civil Rights laws for Asian Americans to aspire to and attain a college degree. The new Asian immigrants, a few from Japan, but many more from other Asian and Southeast Asian countries, face a more hospitable U. S. environment and are less burdened by history. They will probably be matching and surpassing native born Asian Americans in educational attainment within the first generation, as Chiswick has reported for many other immigrant groups.

There is, in student self-reports, considerable evidence that suggests individual Asian Americans are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, but make academic and career decisions that are rational based on a risk adverse strategy. The net result for all Asian Americans will probably be a reasonable return on their investment in education, but at the cost of being the silent minority in terms of political, social and economic affairs of our nation.

Not only new immigrants, but even fourth generation Asian Americans generally perform verbal reasoning tasks less well than their peers. From preschool to graduate studies, the typical profile of Asian American abilities

has been somewhat above average in performance and mathematical tasks, and lower than average in verbal tasks. Given their persistence and interest in higher education, Asian American high school and college students might be expected to take more English coursework to improve their verbal performance for college and beyond, but that has not been the case. The SDQ data from recent ATP summaries have reported that Asian Americans on the average spent less time studying English and social studies, and more time taking courses in mathematics and science, particularly physical sciences. Asian American high school grade point averages are typically higher than other groups', even in English. For example, the average English grades of ACT participants was higher than Whites', but not by as much as their mathematics grades. Grades in English don't reflect only the ability to read, write and use the English language, but are also colored by extraneous factors such as regular attendance, classroom deportment and timely completion of homework assignments. There is also independent evidence from observations and work samples that Asian Americans are limited in and by their written and oral expression.

College-bound Asian Americans generally rate themselves relatively low for written and spoken expression. The net result of lower than average verbal reasoning abilities, fewer years spent in high school English courses or courses that emphasize student center discussions, and more in physical science and mathematics in high school, including many Advanced Placement credits, is that Asian American high school students have limited their future education options and sacrificed a breadth of learning for the sake of marginally higher high school grade point averages. The differential

coursework hypothesis used to explain group and sex differences in SAT performance could be used to argue that generally improved Asian American verbal reasoning and spoken English as well as written expression could result from even a modest redistribution of high school and college coursework without significantly lowering GPAs.

A better case for excellence particularly in math and science could be made for Asian newcomers than for assimilated third and later generation Asian Americans. Peng and his NCES colleagues analysed Asian American improvement in test performance between 1980 and 1982 in the High School and Beyond survey. Asians who had been in this country 6 to 10 years, in other words, those who had some basic schooling in Asia, learned more in mathematics and science than their brethran who had been in this country for all or almost all their elementary and secondary education. They were also very close to native born Asian American gains in language skills. Bagasao reported that U. S. born and raised Asian Americans planned science careers at about the same rate as White classmates, about 40%. About 70% of recent Asian immigrants planned careers in science. Earlier arrivals, who have lived in the U. S. longer, were in between.

Among recent high school students who won honors or scholarship awards in the National Westinghouse Science Talent Search, Asian American names and faces have occurred with increasing frequency. Since 1979, 20% of the Westinghouse Washington trip and scholarship winners have been Asian Americans from diverse ethnic origins. Of this group, who were honored for excellence in planning and completing original science and mathematics projects, 67% were first generation, and 27% second generation.

Why have first and second generation Asian Americans invested so much energy in academic and particularly science and math excellence? Selective migration may explain some of the motivation, many are the sons and daughters of Asian "brain drain." Another possibility is that there is a particularly fortuitous combination of early preparation in demanding and restrictive Asian elementary schools, followed by the heady freedom and liberalism of American middle and secondary schooling. The confluence of factors has encouraged the academic and scientific interests of Asian newcomers to flower--something akin to Sylvano Arieti's creativogenic environment. Those who have gained strength in the English language or performing arts, have also won recognition for their artistry or creativity.

Investigators, for example Kitano, have reported that the most acculturated and assimilated Asian Americans, third and later generation Japanese Americans, do not pursue academic excellence with as much zeal as their forebears. However, Japanese have clearly been successful in terms of jobs and careers. They have the highest individual and family incomes of any group surveyed in the 1980 census. We all know the relationship between excellence in education and getting ahead in careers is a weak one. Japanese Americans have, more than other Asian American groups, assimilated to the extent of being competitive in the job market.

With the exception of Japanese Americans, most Asian Americans are narrow in their academic aspirations and career choices--perhaps due to imperfect understanding of American language or society. Their concentration in a few areas of specialization suggests potential difficulties in career development, absent the verbal fluency needed for advancement in any field. First, Asian

Americans and Asian immigrants, who major in the same subjects, in effect compete against each other in the labor market. Young (1978) has demonstrated that at least until 1960, despite high educational achievement, Asian Americans experienced economic discrimination in that they received less returns to education than Whites. He predicted that with the Civil Rights legislation and changing public climate, returns to education should rise in the 1970s.

Absolute income for individuals and families have risen in both the 1970 and 1980 census. According to the 1980 census, median family incomes of Japanese Americans, Asian Indians, Filipino Americans and Chinese Americans exceeded White families'. The family size of every Asian group was larger, by a tiny fraction of a percent in the case of Japanese Americans, by one and a half people in Vietnamese families. More members of Asian American families work than all other Americans'. In 1980, 63% of Asian American families had 2 or more workers, and only 7.8% had no workers. While 55% of White families had 2 or more workers, and 13% reported no workers. On a per capita basis, however, only the income of Japanese Americans and the Asian Indians, who have the highes level of education, exceed Whites. Vietnamese, the most recent arrivals, have less than half the national average per capita income.

Freeman reported that up to mid-1970s, Asian American academicians, with better education, more qualifications and greater productivity in terms of published articles than Whites, were still being paid less in terms of quality adjusted income. In 1981, according to the National Science Foundation biennial survey, 7.8 percent of employed scientists and engineers with doctorates in the U. S. were of Asian descent. They constitute a significant

national resource. The three major employers for science and engineering doctorates are academic institutions, business and industry, and the federal government. In each of these sectors, Asian scientists median salary was still less than that of Whites. The exception was among Asian women doctoral scientists and engineers, who were 6.9% of all women. They reported median salaries higher than White women and lower than Black women scientists, but women scientists' income are complicated by other factors.

These narrowing differences might represent a legacy of past discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion. Recent National Science Foundation surveys have reported Asian bachelor's and master's level scientists and engineers to be receiving the same as or a little higher salaries than Whites. The higher salary in some specialties may be related to the quality of the institutions attended, and their academic records. Asians, including Asian Americans, permanent residents and nonresident aliens, majored in engineering and the physical sciences, which may have paid better than the biological or social sciences. Among minority recent doctorates who were working in academic institutions, 69% were Asians. Among those with faculty appointments, 95% of the minority biochemists and computer scientists were Asians, and 88% of the physicists. Asian junior faculty represented 85% of all minorities in physiology, 80% in engineering; but only 14% in sociology and 15% in psychology. The same picture prevails among minority nonfaculty research recent doctorates, 87% of whom were Asian—99% of engineers, 93% in physical sciences, 77% in biological sciences, 75% in mathematics.

Will high Asian American and Asian participation in a limited number of departments lead to more equitable salary structures, broadened professional networks and eventual invitation to take on departmental or university decision making roles at the same rates as Whites and other minority groups? Only time can tell. However, it has not been the case in the past. Nor will it be likely in the future, unless Asian Americans' quality and level of communications improve.

Strong skills in reading, listening, speaking and writing are needed for academic and professional career development: to be an influential teacher, to discuss and debate with institutional and professional colleagues, to present scholarly works to the profession and informed view points to the public, to be an articulate, active member of a community of scholars or professionals. Communicating in a common language, which means English, is particularly crucial for developing at least the notion of a common cause, if not a sense of community, among the scores of Asian cultural and language groups. It will require a delicate balancing of interests for Asian Americans to maintain their individual and ethnic identities and at the same time to work together for equity and excellence in education. We can't afford to remain the silent minority if we are to participate fully in America's intellectual, social, economic and political life.

Jayjia Hsia

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